

# *Sūrah 96*

## *Al-‘Alaq*

(The Clot)

(Makkan Period)

### *Title*

The word *al-‘alaq* (the clot), featuring in Verse 2, constitutes the *Sūrah*’s title.

### *Period of Revelation*

This *Sūrah* has two parts: Part 1 consists of Verses 1-5 and Part 2 extends from Verse 6 to the concluding Verse 19. The consensus view is that Part 1 represents the first revelation sent down to the Prophet (peace be upon him). On this issue, ‘Ā’ishah’s report, being one of the most authentic, is regarded as conclusive and is cited by Imām Aḥmad, Bukhārī, Muslim and many *Ḥadīth* scholars, with several chains of narrators. ‘Ā’ishah’s report is based on the Prophet’s own version of his reception of the first revelation. Ibn ‘Abbās, Abū Mūsā Ash‘arī, and a group of Companions endorse the above position that Verses 1-5 of this *Sūrah* constitute the earliest revelation to the Prophet (peace be upon him). Part 2 was sent down to him when he commenced Prayer inside the Ka‘bah, while Abū Jahl tried to stop him, giving dire warnings.

*Beginning of Revelation*

The account of the beginning of revelation is provided by *Ḥadīth* scholars on the basis of 'Ā'ishah's report, with Imām Zuhri, and 'Urwah ibn Zubayr as its narrators. 'Ā'ishah reports: "The Prophet (peace be upon him) started receiving divine revelation in the form of true dreams. These dreams appeared to him taking place in broad daylight. He then took to seclusion and spent several nights while worshipping inside the cave of *Hirā'*." 'Ā'ishah employs the word *taḥannuth* which is explained by Imām Zuhri as worship. It was some form of worship, for he had not by then been instructed in the liturgical mode of worship. He used to take food and drink supplies to last a few days and spent all his time in the cave. He then returned to Khadijah, who replenished his provisions. One day while he was inside the cave, the divine revelation came to him suddenly. The angel asked him to read. 'Ā'ishah relates the following account in the Prophet's own words: "I said: 'I am not literate.' Upon this the angel pressed me so hard that I could hardly bear it. He then released me and asked me to read. I repeated: 'I am not literate.' Again he pressed me and it became almost intolerable for me. Then he set me free and asked me to read. Again I said: 'I am not literate.' For the third time he pressed me until it became almost unbearable for me. Then he released me again. He then recited the opening verse of *Sūrah al-'Alaq*: 'Recite in the name of your Lord Who created,' and kept reciting up to Verse 5 of the *Sūrah*," 'Ā'ishah adds that after the above encounter the Prophet (peace be upon him) returned home, shaking and trembling. He asked Khadijah to cover him. After a while he came out of the state of fear. Then he said: "O Khadijah, what has happened to me?" He then related his encounter to her, saying that he feared for his life. She told him: "Never so. Be at ease. By the Lord, He will not disgrace you. You act kindly towards your kith and kin, speak that truth, (a report adds: 'You faithfully return the trusts'), carry the burden of the weak, spend your earnings on the poor, take good care of guests and assist in good acts." She then took him to her cousin, Waraqah ibn Nawfal, who had embraced Christianity in the *Jāhiliyah* period and used to copy the Gospel in Arabic and Hebrew. By then he had grown too old and blind. Khadijah told

him: "O Brother! Listen to the account of your nephew." Waraqah asked him what he had seen. He related to him everything. Upon this Waraqah exclaimed: "He is the same angel whom Allah had sent to the Prophet Moses (peace be upon him). I wish I had been a strong youth during your ministry. I wish I live up to the day when your people will expel you." The Prophet (peace be upon him) asked him whether his own people would expel him. To this he replied: "Yes, every Messenger has been opposed. If I survive up to your ministry, I will extend you every possible help." A little after this meeting Waraqah died.

It is patently clear from the above account that until the appearance of that angel the Prophet (peace be upon him) had no inkling about his elevation as a Messenger of Allah. Far from seeking or expecting it, he had absolutely no idea of this coveted position to be conferred upon him. The sending down of revelation and the angel's visit were totally unexpected, which took him by utter surprise, like any ordinary person in that situation. This explains why the Makkan unbelievers never charged him with having made preparations for this office, though they hurled all other baseless accusations at him.

The above incident also underscores his unblemished pre-Prophetic life and his noble character. Khadijah was a mature lady of fifty-five years and had been his wife for fifteen years. No lapse of his could be hidden from her for being his wife for so long. Yet she had found him such a righteous person during her long, close association with him that when he related to her his encounter, without any reservation she accepted that an angel had come to him with revelation. Likewise, Waraqah had been a resident of Makkah for a long time and was someone who knew the Prophet (peace be upon him) quite well. In his capacity as Khadijah's cousin he had first-hand knowledge of the Prophet's character and conduct. On hearing about that incident he did not dismiss it. Rather, he instantly recognized it as revelation, the like of which had been sent down to the Prophet Moses (peace be upon him) through the agency of an angel. In his estimation too, the Prophet (peace be upon him) was such a pious, exalted person whose appointment as the Messenger of Allah did not come as a surprise to him.

Part Two of the *Sūrah* was revealed when the Prophet (peace be upon him) started offering Prayer in the Ka'bah. Abū Jahl forcibly tried to stop him. It appears that before making a public call to Islam, the Prophet (peace be upon him) had started offering Prayer according to its Islamic form, which Allah had taught him. Upon observing this the Quraysh realized that he was following some new faith. While others watched in astonishment, Abū Jahl, being an ardent devotee of the *Jāhiliyyah* order, took to threatening him and asking him not to pray in this fashion inside the Ka'bah. The *Aḥādīth* reports narrated by Ibn 'Abbās and Abū Hurayrah describe at length Abū Jahl's outrageous acts on this count.

Abū Hurayrah relates the following: "Abū Jahl asked the members of the Quraysh whether Muḥammad prostrates, placing his face on the ground. When they replied in the affirmative, he yelled: "By Lāt and al-'Uzzā! If I see him praying in this way, I will place my foot on his neck and crush his face." On seeing the Prophet (peace be upon him) praying, he proceeded in order to put his foot on his neck. However, those present saw him withdrawing, trying to ward off something from his face. On being asked what had befallen him, he replied: "There was something dreadful and a trench of fire between me and him. I saw some wings as well." The Prophet (peace be upon him) later said: "Had he approached me, the angels would have torn him into pieces," (Aḥmad, Muslim, Bukhārī, *Ṣiḡāt al-Munāfiqīn*, Nasā'ī, Ibn Jarīr, *Tafsīr Sūrah al-'Alaq*, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Ibn al-Mundhir, Ibn Marduwayh, Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī and Bayhaqī.)

Ibn 'Abbās reports: Abū Jahl said that he would crush the Prophet's neck with his foot if he ever saw him offering Prayer around the Ka'bah. When this report reached the Prophet (peace be upon him), he said: "If he does so, angels will seize him publicly," (Bukhārī, Tirmidhī, Nasā'ī, Ibn Jarīr 'Abd al-Razzāq, 'Abd ibn Ḥumayd, Ibn al-Mundhir and Ibn Marduwayh.)

There is another report on Ibn 'Abbās's authority: "Once while the Prophet (peace be upon him) was engaged in Prayer near the Prophet Abraham's station, Abū Jahl passed by. He told the former: 'Had I not prohibited you from this?' Then he started issuing warnings and threats. However, the former rebuked him sternly. Abū Jahl then said: 'O Muḥammad! How dare you rebuke

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me! By God! I have many allies in this valley'," (Aḥmad, Tirmidhī, *Kitāb al-Tafsīr*, Nasā'ī, Ibn Jarīr, Ibn Abī Shaybah, Ibn al-Mundhir, Ṭabarānī and Ibn Marduwayh.)

Part Two of this *Sūrah* concerns the above incident. It commences with Verse 6 of the *Sūrah*, which is aptly placed there. For the first manifestation of Islam was the Prophet's Prayer, which marked his first confrontation with the unbelievers.